

Montana's Charlie Russell

New book corrals Montana Historical Society's collection of Russell art

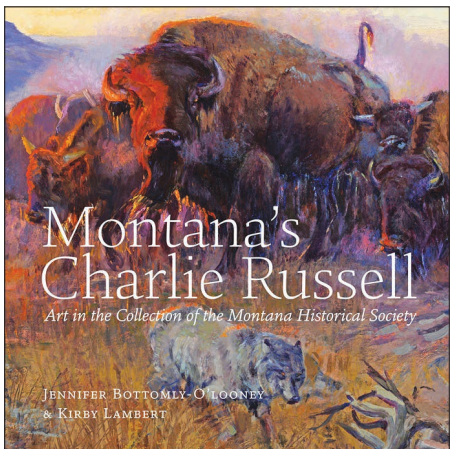
In June 1915, Nancy Russell wrote Wall Street financier Malcolm S. Mackay regarding his purchase of her husband's recently completed oil painting, "When Horses Talk War There's Slim Chance for Truce."

In her letter, she asked Mackay, "Do you know that you have as good a collection of pictures, or if anything, better, than we have? And a lot finer than any other person."

Since 1952 this outstanding group of Charlie's "pictures" – 43 oils, watercolors, bronzes, and pen-and-ink sketches – has formed the nucleus of the Montana Historical Society's unmatched assemblage of the famed cowboy artist's paintings, illustrated letters, sketches and sculpture.

It's long been the dream of many at the Historical Society to reproduce its entire Russell art collection in a high-quality book that would celebrate the artist's vision of Montana and the breadth of his amazing career – a trajectory that took him from cowboying in the Judith Gap to being one of the best-loved artists of the West.

That dream finally came to fruition with a new book by the MHS Press, *Montana's Charlie Russell: Art in the Collection of the Montana Historical Society*.



The Montana Historical Society Press recently published *Montana's Charlie Russell*.

The handsome hardcover book, authored by MHS staffers Jennifer Bottomly-O'Looney and Kirby Lambert, features high-resolution reproductions of all 230 Russell artworks in the MHS collection.

According to Lambert, the society has one of the largest, and highest quality collections of Russell's work in the nation. Mackay, who was a friend of the artist, "just had really good taste, and was a pretty demanding patron."

According to Lambert, who has been working on the project for the past four years, "the whole thing has been really exciting."

The book offers a succinct way for the Society "to share why Russell is still important, why he still speaks to, and for, Montanans."

Lambert, who grew up in Texas, says he knew little about Montana's famed cowboy artist when he joined the historical society 30 years ago. "Over the years, I've

worked on various exhibits and topics. Often, by the time you're done, you're tired of it," he says. "I never got tired of Russell."

The reasons are wrapped around the artist's talent and personality. "He's a great artist, a remarkable storyteller," says Lambert. "He was extremely prolific and had a great sense of humor."

In addition to making the collection available to a broader audience, Lambert hopes the book helps convey the personality and charisma of the man who made more than 2,000 paintings in his

lifetime. The book also chronicles the progression of his career from his arrival in Montana in 1880, when open-range ranching was at its peak, until his death in 1926.

"There's nothing better than his letters for getting a sense of who he was," says Lambert. "He didn't like to write letters, so they were pretty short ... He couldn't spell, and he had really bad handwriting. But they're so colorful."

Researching the book also gave Lambert an opportunity to read through the business correspondence written by the artist's wife, Nancy. "It gave me a greater appreciation for how important she was," he said.

The 418-page book also includes images of artifacts from the archives, like Russell's beat-up cowboy hat, his spurs and branding iron, and photographs of the artist, his favorite horses, his wife, and many of their friends.

It tells the stories behind each of Russell's artworks in the collection, drawing on information from Russell experts across the nation. Even devoted Russell fans are sure to find "several surprises," says Lambert.

For example, Russell's series of "Keeoma" paintings, which depict a sensual Native woman reclining in a tipi, were rumored to be paintings of an Indian woman he had once loved. But the book dispels that notion with a photograph of his wife posing for the painting.

Historian K. Ross Toole, who was director of the Society in 1952, said while raising funds to acquire the Mackay collection: "If Montana has contributed one thing to the heritage of the whole West, it is Charles M. Russell's paintings ... It was Montana that inspired him; it was Montana that he painted."

The hardcover book is 12-by-12 inches, and sells for \$80. Visit mhs.mt.gov for more information.

– Kristi Niemeyer



13

Solar array helps Emerson center save on power bill

The Emerson Center for Arts and Culture in Bozeman now sports a large-scale solar array on its rooftop, thanks to long-time supporter and local renewable energy leader Tim Crawford, who spearheaded the project.

Onsite Energy Inc., an innovative Bozeman-based solar electric installation company, was brought on board to design and oversee the Emerson array. The resulting system grew in size and scope, utilizing many local engineers, electricians and roofers, in addition to Onsite Energy's own workforce.

Completed in early September, the resulting 110-panel system covers the entire south-facing theater roof and produces over 30kw of peak power. It's the largest individual solar array installed, to date, within the Bozeman city limits.

The project will help the Emerson lower its operating expenses by offsetting a portion of its metered electrical draw. The center plans to reinvest those savings to help further expand its mission to build community by promoting arts and culture in a historic building.

Helena-made fly boxes grace cover of Orvis catalog

By Tom Kuglin
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There may be no middle ground from designing in a friend's garage in Helena to appearing on a catalog cover for the biggest company in an industry, but Al Swanson said it must just be a sign that his shop is doing something right.

Less than a year ago, Swanson, owner of A.L. Swanson Gallery and Craftsman Studio in the Great Northern Town Center in Helena, decided to build a prototype for a wooden fly box, pairing fine woods with precise craftsmanship. Once he and employee Jacob Franklin decided they had the perfect box, he shipped it to Orvis, the largest fly angling retailer in the world. After waiting, Swanson got the reply he was hoping for – that Orvis loved the boxes and wanted to contract for sale in their catalog.

"Most people send them a product or pitch, and they say, 'We already have that,'" he said. "It was amazing they didn't say 'no,' and now we have the biggest company in the world saying 'yes.'"

Swanson specializes in high-end, hand-crafted furniture. The idea to build the boxes that represent Montana's legendary trout fishing meant incorporating a new medium and technology with a precision, computer-controlled router to produce the quality and artistic look he wanted.

"They essentially start as these beautiful pieces of wood," Swanson said, running his fingers along the dark grain of a piece of walnut. "That's the cool thing about technology in today's world that we can build these in bulk and still keep the quality of our products top notch."

Designing the prototype meant months of hand making boxes and building jigs and templates, he said. When they sent the first box to Orvis, the shop didn't even own its own router, using a friend's to build and load their designs into computer software, Swanson said.

Orvis recently released four catalogs for its "Sporting Gifts Collection," incorporating

unique products with good stories behind them, said Simon Perkins, senior manager of Orvis Adventures and Hunting.

"We're looking for high quality and really unique special gifts," he said. "Knowing Al's background – there was obviously an incredi-



Al Swanson works on a custom fly box in his Helena studio.
(Photo by Thom Bridge/Courtesy of Helena Independent Record)

ble amount of time and artistry – we could tell there was no question of quality, and it was able to happen very quickly."

As Orvis was preparing the release the four catalogs, Swanson got a call that the boxes were being considered for a cover. Orvis also wanted to write a profile to tell customers Swanson and the boxes' story.

Although they competed with many more established manufacturers and products, when the catalogs hit the mail last week, Swanson's fly boxes appeared on three of the four covers, and the profile ran on the back of one issue.

"A lot of people out there look at Montana as a mecca for fly-fishing, and being a quality wooden fly box from Montana is one reason I think it was such a great fit," Perkins said. "The story behind it and the craft in every single box does a great job of embodying those Montana rivers."

"It's so cool to have this little mini manufacturing element here in Helena," Swanson said. "If you would have asked me eight months ago, I never would've guessed that we'd go from not having sold a single one to Orvis – it happened this quick."

Along with the simpler designs sold by Orvis called the Blackfoot and the Madison to reflect two of Montana's most iconic rivers,

Swanson's shop sells several higher-end models called Fly Caddies directly from its website at www.alswanson.com. Versions like the Drake and the Henry include an inlaid fly, with shimmering wings made from abalone and grainy woods that appear like flowing water.

The boxes can also be customized to include initials or any company logo, Swanson said.

"The wood combinations make each box like a character with its own personality and it allows us to be limitless," he said.

While the router gets the boxes about half way, the finishing touches include hand work to sand, stain and add layers of marine epoxy, he said. Additional work is needed to install brass hinges, magnets capped with abalone, fly inserts and any custom details, Swanson said.

Because of their work as high-end furniture makers, Swanson's shop already had access to some of the finest woods available, he said.

"We're not really pinching corners here, this is very expensive wood," Franklin said. "It's been fun with a new medium, and I'm on the computer all night because I can't stop thinking of designs."

Swanson has no intentions of giving up handcrafting furniture, even with the initial buzz around the boxes, he said. The boxes are a good economic diversification for his shop with the limited clientele in the furniture market, he said.

"This may be something where we can ultimately hire more people and expand the business," Swanson said.

While he learned the art of traditional woodwork with hand tools in New England, Swanson said he still takes the same artistic pride in the boxes as he does a hand-built dining room table or chair. He has plans to expand beyond the boxes currently available to include lines of various sizes and purposes, he said.

"We wanted to do something that was sexy but also functional, that floats and is water repellent," Swanson said. "There was a lot of head scratching and frustration, but I wanted people to go, 'I was at so-and-so's house last night and saw a piece and knew it was yours.'"